

Art and Habitat, 1955

This text has its origin in a declaration of principles for the journal *Art et Habitat*, which Constant and Stephen Gilbert intended to devote to the 'synthesis of the arts' (1953). The journal was never published, however, and Constant revised and developed the text in 1955. In it he examines the conditions necessary for a fundamental transformation of both aesthetic and functional concepts, which will lead to a true integration of the arts. Constant argues that contemporary architecture is directed at rational and functional production. He accuses the free arts of remaining apart from the public sphere. A genuine integration of the arts involves an intensive collaboration between the architect and the visual artist. As a result of this close contact, space, form and colour achieve an unbreakable unity because they are created in interaction with one another.

ART AND HABITAT

1. AESTHETICS AND FUNCTION

It seems that a closer relationship than mere influence between the plastic arts and architecture would be desirable, a relationship that would go so far as to eliminate the limits of each specific art, finally arriving at a true integration of the arts. However, coming closer like this cannot take place without a fundamental change in aesthetic as well as functional concepts.

Examining the conditions that might lead to such change is the point of this study.

This direct influence of function becomes particularly significant when one starts to consider the relationship between the plastic arts and modern architecture.

The architect, preoccupied by his technical problems, which leave him little time to study and elaborate the plastic expression of his work, seems to be able to do little better than let himself be inspired by the plastic products of free art. On the other hand, the plastic artist, painter or sculptor, refuses to sacrifice any part of his freedom of expression by being tied to a functional problem of housing – insofar as he would have been able to surmount the technical difficulties of such an activity, which would require lengthy study.

The result of this situation, in spite of all attempts to bring them together, is a growing distance between aesthetic creation and functional production. Consequently, architecture will never reach its full potential in terms of plasticity, and the free arts are doomed to remain outside public life instead of coming to take their logical place in a cultural society.

2. WHAT MODERN ARCHITECTURE LACKS IS THE PLASTIC

The architect, having to deliver a structure, is becoming more rational and, will have neither the time nor the enthusiasm to acquire the plastic experience that plastic artists have. Yet,

the spatial and plastic creation requires more than ever a profound study of aesthetic issues, without which no progress will be possible.

Architecture, if it hopes to rise to the level of art without being its derivative, will not be able to do so without the active participation of plastic artists. While the work of the architect must necessarily come closer to that of the engineer, given the complexity of new construction processes, the plastic artist, within the team of builders, will be able to take on responsibility for aesthetics.

This aesthetic part can never imply work of a decorative or ornamental nature, and we strongly oppose any tendency to decorate architecture with mural paintings or monumental sculptures, abstract or not.

Neoplasticist painting has put an end, once and for all, to decoration and has replaced it with basic aesthetic rules applicable to any plastic creation. Thanks to this, architecture has been able to free itself of the predominance of the facade and has purified its means, even down to the structure itself. This is where we are today, and any tendency that aims for a synthesis of this architecture that has become more functional and the plastic arts that remain decorative would be a step backward.

By contrast, the identification of the aesthetic principles of architecture with the major arts has created the very condition for a coming together that goes so far as an absolute integration. Subject to the same rules of creation, the various plastic means, form, colour, construction, light, once strictly linked to a specific mode of expression, will now be able to be combined in order to complete one another within a new unity of space. The painter interested in space, the sculptor in construction, the architect in colour – these are the first clear indications of the path towards a true integration of the arts.

Indeed, the place of painting is clearly where colour is called for, therefore in space, and thus its style will not be able to distance itself from architectural style and space without resulting in a dualism disastrous for both painting and architecture. Form and colour in the plastic and spatial arts will never be anything but one and the same, and the architect and the painter come together in the same quest to create space for this unity of means.*

3. THE HABITAT IS THE MOST COMPLETE OF ARTWORKS

Given that the aim of art is the aesthetic emotion evoked within man, one notes that this aim is most directly and to the greatest extent produced in the everyday human environment itself. The primary objective of creative man is the transformation of his habitat according to the evolution of his physical and psychological needs. When one includes among the latter his essential need for colour and form, one can easily imagine the task that can be achieved by the plastic arts in the creation of the human habitat.

CIAM has defined the habitat as the environment suited to satisfy material and emotional needs of man and to stimulate human spiritual development. This implies the direct contribution of art, from the very first steps taken toward building the habitat. For too long, function has been seen as the satisfaction of material needs only. It seems the time has come to recognize psychological and emotional functions as at least as important as material functions, and inseparable from them. Only in this way will the habitat be able to become the perfect unity of all the aspects of life, which will be extended into the organizations of collective life. In this all plastic means will be able to flourish and reach their most complete achievement.

It is vital that the same aesthetic principles be maintained from the smallest housing unit to the whole of large cities, principles that must be dictated by function, in the new concept of the word. The opposition of the individual interior to the hostile and chaotic exterior is not conducive to rest and psychological equilibrium. And so urban designers have reached the point of studying the relationship between outside and inside, by relying on the thesis that the street and the common space are merely the extension of the family space inside dwellings. The most complete unity of both will be the logical result of a functionalism that will have adopted the functions of spiritual life. One can therefore say that the style of the habitat is dictated by function, and by nothing else. Under these conditions, the need for beauty that, at present, remains unsatisfied for the majority of humanity will enter into a direct and permanent relationship with plastic creation. Art will cease to be the expression of the individual and, while serving a general purpose, will derive from it its universal character. Function, in the broader sense, will become essential to every plastic problem faced by the artist, to the point that a common style, social in the true sense of the word, will result. The birth of such a style is all the more pressing given the need to build entire cities within a short time frame, a need born of the acute housing crisis precipitated by the war and the urbanization of agrarian countries. In such circumstances, urbanization must take into account the multiplication of standardized forms, and the urban design aesthetics that must be developed will only have to be based on the rhythm of an unlimited number.

* The final paragraph of this section was added by hand to the typescript.

The typed manuscript 'Art et Habitat' (1955) is in the Constant archive at the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD).